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8 The monarchy and public values 1910–1953*

Philip Williamson

As a former imperial proconsul and cabinet veteran of the Abyssinian and Rhineland crises, the Marquess of Zetland was not easily alarmed; yet in November 1936 he described the government as ‘faced with a problem compared with which even the international issues, grave as they assuredly are, pale into comparative insignificance’. This and similar comments by other public figures during that year¹ might be dismissed as over-reactions, characteristic of the loss of proportion which afflicts many statements about the British monarchy. King Edward VIII’s wish to marry Mrs Simpson hardly seems so menacing as the activities of Franco, Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin. There was no constitutional conflict and no civil disorder, only an exercise in political management; fears of national and imperial calamity were swiftly dispelled by a straightforward dynastic adjustment, substituting one brother for another on the throne.

Yet a retrospective view that the severity of the ‘abdication crisis’² was exaggerated begs the question of why contemporaries regarded the King’s proposed marriage as such a fundamental problem. It also raises larger questions about the monarchy’s position in early twentieth-century public life. A leading theme of statements about the monarchy was that although its political power had declined, its public significance had increased. Baldwin, for example, declared in 1935 that ‘the influence of the Crown, . . . the necessity of the Crown, has become a thing of paramount importance’.³ The monarchy also appeared to have become

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¹ Zetland to Linlithgow, 27 Nov. 1936, Zetland papers, Mss Eur D 609/7/136, Oriental and India Office Collections, British Library; and see e.g. *The Reith Diaries*, ed. C. Stuart (London, 1975), p. 188 (28 May, 10 July 1936); T. Jones, *A Diary With Letters 1931–1950* (London, 1954), p. 290 (3 Dec. 1936); *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. A. O. Bell, vol. 5 (London, 1984), p. 39 (7 Dec. 1936).

² In strict terms this traditional designation is misleading. The problem was the King’s proposed marriage; his abdication was not the cause of the crisis, but its solution.

³ *The Times*, 4 May 1935.

more popular, as shown spectacularly in 1935–7 by the Silver Jubilee, George V's death, and George VI's coronation, and again in 1952–3 by George VI's death and Elizabeth II's coronation. So remarkable was the public interest on each occasion that for the first time since Bagehot, commentators and academics began to regard the monarchy's popularity as an intellectual problem.⁴ By 1953 there seemed to have been an 'extraordinary upsurge and renaissance of monarchical feeling . . . in the last thirty or forty years'.⁵

During those years the conditions for monarchy had been transformed, and not obviously in ways which assisted it: still greater concentration of power in the hands of politicians and officials; the establishment of a fully democratic electorate and emergence of a powerful labour movement; prolonged periods of economic difficulties, social distress and industrial unrest; millions conscripted and hundreds of thousands killed and wounded in 'the King's service', and the civilian population exposed to the bombings, privations and dislocations of total war; republican secession from the United Kingdom, and an Empire becoming a Commonwealth of autonomous nations. Across Europe other monarchies collapsed, and were often succeeded by fascist or communist dictatorships. Although Britain did not suffer the military defeats or revolutions which destroyed continental monarchies, these new conditions were challenging for its own monarchy and some could be regarded as dangerous. During the first decade of George V's reign, he and his advisers were fearful of the monarchy's chances of survival, particularly because they suspected the Labour party of republican aims. Anxiety about public feeling had very personal repercussions: during the First World War the King replaced his family's German name and titles with English neologisms, renounced his German relatives, and refused refuge for his Russian cousins.⁶ Edward VIII's marriage proposal and abdication were certainly crises for the royal family itself, and George VI thought he had been

⁴ E.g. E. Jones, 'The psychology of constitutional monarchy', *New Statesman*, 1 Feb. 1936; K. Martin articles in *Political Quarterly* and *New Statesman* 1936–7, summarized in his *The Magic of Monarchy* (London, 1937); H. Laski, *Parliamentary Government in England* (London, 1938), pp. 388–96. The 1936–7 royal occasions also prompted the creation of the social research organisation, Mass-Observation: see P. Ziegler, *Crown and People* (London, 1978), pp. 9–10, and H. Jennings and C. Madge (eds.), *May The Twelfth* (London, 1937; 1987).

⁵ S. Haffner, 'The renaissance of monarchy', *Twentieth Century* 154 (1953), 418. See also E. Shils and M. Young, 'The meaning of the coronation', *Sociological Review* 1 (1953), 63–81, and for a historical verdict R. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures. England 1918–1951* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 3, 7.

⁶ F. Prochaska, 'George V and republicanism 1917–1919', *Twentieth Century British History* 10 (1999), 27–51, and F. Prochaska, *The Republic of Britain* (London, 2000), pp. 154–78.

encumbered with a tarnished and unsteady throne. Yet the monarchy emerged unscathed, and by the time of Elizabeth II's accession none at the Palace could have been disturbed by republican nightmares.

How did the monarchy remain secure and popular? Why, in the new political democracy from 1918 and social democracy from the mid 1940s, was it presented as more, not less, important? Why did it preserve its considerable prominence rather than subsiding, as some in the 1930s suggested it should,⁷ into the more discreet role of the Scandinavian monarchies? Answers to these questions also provide the best context for understanding Edward VIII's abdication. Despite excellent and well documented accounts of the episode,⁸ speculation continues about suppressed political or policy causes – that his marriage proposal was a ministerial or 'establishment' pretext for removing a King with inconvenient sympathies towards the unemployed or Nazi Germany, and still more inconvenient populist political ambitions. Such claims persist largely because since 1936 the contemporary public considerations have lost most of their force and so seem, wrongly, to provide insufficient explanation for the King's departure.⁹ Understanding the reasons for the monarchy's continued significance shows why as late as the 1930s a royal marriage could still be a major problem of state.

I

With an institution so long established and so central to public life as the monarchy, in any relatively short period little is wholly new: the main patterns are continuity, adaptation and renovation. The constitutional position and political role; the alluring combination of ceremonial display, domesticity and 'ordinariness'; the Christian example and philanthropic endeavours, and the provincial and imperial visits of the royal family – all have antecedents in the reign of Victoria or even George III. Even projection in the new mass media of radio, film and television added only greater immediacy to the already enormous coverage of the monarchy in the existing mass media of print and photographic

⁷ *New Statesman*, 12 Dec. 1936, and see below, p. 241.

⁸ The 'abdication' files released by the National Archives in 2003 add little to the essentials cumulatively established from other sources by K. Middlemas and J. Barnes, *Baldern* (London, 1969), ch. 34; F. Donaldson, *Edward VIII* (London, 1974), chs. 14–23; M. Bloch, *The Reign and Abdication of Edward VIII* (London, 1990); and also, with early access to the government files as well as Edward VIII's papers, by P. Ziegler, *King Edward VIII* (London, 1990), chs. 14–18.

⁹ A recent example, notwithstanding valuable documentary research, is Susan Williams, *The People's King* (London, 2003).

reproduction.¹⁰ Nevertheless, reflection on the monarchy's adjustment to early twentieth-century conditions reveals much about its character and, more significantly, about the support it received from other institutions and voluntary organizations. The instances of renewed royal effort are mostly familiar: more public ceremonies, more frequent royal visits, increased patronage of voluntary social and medical services, and the innovation of a *silver* jubilee, where the precedents were only for golden and diamond jubilees.¹¹ There was, however, a further development deserving closer examination: the monarchy became more vocal.¹² As the royal family's activities and visits increased, so its members made more speeches and issued more messages, heard or received more public addresses, and attracted greater media commentary. Collectively these statements provided sustained expositions of what the monarchy represented and commended, and explanations of the social meanings of its ceremonies, visits and philanthropy. The effect was to enhance what had become its chief function – to express and symbolize public values.

The pressure upon members of the royal family to speak could be inexorable, overcoming their own reluctance. This was especially so for what became the monarchy's most important speaking occasion. It was nine years before George V could be persuaded to broadcast a Christmas Day message, but in 1932 it made such an impact that he found he could not escape its annual recurrence.¹³ So necessary a royal attribute did public speaking become that serious difficulties arose with George VI. Before 1914 a royal stammer would have been a minor matter, but in the 1920s it raised doubts about the then Duke of York's suitability for public duties. Even with assistance from a speech therapist and a BBC sound engineer, the preparation, rehearsal and delivery of his speeches were an ordeal for himself, his staff, and event organizers. His first Christmas broadcast, in 1937, was explicitly intended to end the new 'tradition';

¹⁰ See, notably, L. Colley, *Britons. Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (New Haven, 1992), ch. 5; F. Prochaska, *Royal Bounty* (New Haven, 1995); W. H. Kuhn, *Democratic Royalism* (Basingstoke, 1996); J. Plunkett, *Queen Victoria: First Media Monarch* (Oxford, 2003); and Jonathan Parry's chapter in the current volume. These qualify the chronology and main thesis of D. Cannadine, 'The context, performance and meaning of ritual: the British monarchy and the "invention of tradition" c.1820–1977', in E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 101–64.

¹¹ In early discussions it was called a 'semi-jubilee': Bishops meeting, 24–25 Oct. 1934, Lambeth Palace Library. Little evidence appears to have survived on the jubilee's origins. It would not have occurred without ministerial approval, but it does not follow that the motives were party-political: see below note 48.

¹² Though again this was not entirely new: see *The Principal Speeches and Addresses of His Royal Highness the Prince Consort* (London, 1862).

¹³ T. Fleming (intro.), *Voices out of the Air. The Royal Christmas Broadcasts 1932–1981* (London, 1981), pp. 5–9; *Reith Diaries*, pp. 181–3; K. Rose, *King George V* (London, 1983), pp. 393–4.



Figure 8.1. King George VI delivering the 1944 Christmas Day broadcast (The Royal Collection).

only with great difficulty was he persuaded after the outbreak of war to revive it.¹⁴

Monarchs and their family members rarely spoke extempore or wrote their own speeches and statements. Royal pronouncements received immense publicity and required elegance and tact, but royal individuals themselves lacked the literary ability, application and confidence to produce suitable prose.¹⁵ A few speeches (not just the parliamentary King's Speeches) were written by government ministers, who certainly vetted any significant statements bearing on constitutional or policy issues. More were drafted by civil servants, and for overseas tours an official was either

¹⁴ J. Wheeler-Bennett, *King George VI* (London, 1958), pp. 133–5, 207–8, 212–5, 361, 428, 449; S. Bradford, *George VI* (London, 1989), pp. 159–63, 272–3, 276–9, 419; R. Rhodes James, *Spirit Undaunted. The Political Role of George VI* (London, 1998), pp. 176–8; and for 1937, *Voices out of the Air*, pp. 21, 26. In a later controversy about the monarchy's standing, Elizabeth II's speeches were a leading point of criticism: see Lord Altrincham, 'The monarchy today', *National and English Review* 149 (1957), pp. 63, 65.

¹⁵ On the shortcomings of their unaided written and spoken statements, see e.g. Rose, *KGI*, pp. 15, 56, 182–3; *Letters from a Prince 1918–1921*, ed. R. Godfrey (London, 1998), p. ix and *passim*.

seconded to the royal staff for the purpose or supplied by the local governor or ambassador.¹⁶ Recognized masters of public prose were also recruited. Kipling composed several speeches for George V and his sons, and the first two Christmas broadcasts.¹⁷ Archbishop Lang wrote the next two. During the Silver Jubilee, Lang drafted both the King's broadcast and the House of Lords' address to the King, John Buchan wrote the House of Commons' address, and G. M. Trevelyan the King's reply to these two addresses.¹⁸ Authors of George VI's Christmas broadcasts included Baldwin, Churchill, R.A. Butler, and Arthur Bryant.¹⁹ Material for speeches to corporations and societies was usually provided by one of the organization's officers, or another expert in the field. Most of the work was done by the private secretaries to each member of the royal family: they selected draftsmen, revised their texts, and wrote many speeches and statements themselves, just as they drafted most official letters from the King and his family members as well as explicitly writing letters on their behalf. Stamfordham, George V's secretary until 1931 and a 'masterly draftsman', set the standard;²⁰ his successors Wigram and Hardinge presumably contributed too, but the most prolific speech-writer was Sir Alan Lascelles, beginning with Edward as Prince of Wales and continuing with George VI and Princess Elizabeth.²¹

Royal public language was, therefore, the work of numerous minds, which itself indicates that the monarchy was associated with a well recognized vocabulary and set of messages. Notwithstanding the contemporary legend and historical shorthand which speak of monarchs alone deciding the institution's course, such collective effort was also true of

¹⁶ E.g. Ziegler, *KEVIII*, pp. 139, 157; Wheeler-Bennett, *KGVI*, p. 216; James, *Spirit Undaunted*, pp. 69, 161, 249, 282; Bradford, *KGVI*, p. 500. Identifying the original authors of the speeches is not easy, as they observed a protocol of confidentiality and the Royal Archives preserve the convention that the words of royal persons are their own.

¹⁷ Not, as usually stated, just the first one: see Kipling papers 217-9, 17, University of Sussex Library, and for drafts of other speeches, D. Gilmour, *The Long Recessional* (2002), p. 308.

¹⁸ A. Don diary, 6, 9 May 1935, Lambeth Palace Library; D. Cannadine, *G. M. Trevelyan* (London, 1992), pp. 122-4 (Trevelyan also wrote the Jubilee leader in *The Times*); MacDonald to Wigram, 21 Feb. 1935, PREM 1/173, National Archives: this file contains further documents showing that the prime minister's office staff co-ordinated and refined all these addresses.

¹⁹ Hardinge to Baldwin, 29 Nov., 16 Dec. 1939, Baldwin papers 178/313-4, Cambridge University Library; M. Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill. iv 1939-1941* (London, 1983), p. 961; A. Howard, *R. A. Butler* (London, 1987), p. 131; Lascelles to Bryant, 21 Dec. 1946, Bryant papers D4, King's College, London; Cf. Bradford, *GI*, p. 605.

²⁰ Oddly, on this point the earliest official biography is the most frank: J. Gore, *King George V* (London, 1941), pp. 147-8, 209, 220.

²¹ Donaldson, *EVIII*, pp. 102, 398; Ziegler, *KEVIII*, pp. 178, 183, 250; *In Royal Service. Letters and Journals of Sir Alan Lascelles 1920-1936*, ed. D. Hart-Davis (London, 1989), pp. x, 10, 117; James, *Spirit Undaunted*, pp. 176, 249.

its general position in public life. It was not just that for state business, ceremonies and other public duties, they were advised and organized by their private secretaries and senior court officials. Nor was it only that this royal bureaucracy was assisted by a network of government and unofficial advisers – civil servants, ministers, elder statesmen, churchmen, the editor of *The Times*, officers of voluntary societies and charities.²² The modern monarchy's public character had never been determined only by those close to the Palace.²³ In a society becoming less hierarchical and more plural, it could not have preserved its position and popularity without much broader institutional support. Members of the public did not just admire or accept the monarchy for itself and because of its own efforts; they did so also, and crucially, because it was approved by most of the public bodies and voluntary organizations to which they belonged or which they supported or respected, and by most of the media which further influenced their opinions.

Why did this wide organizational support remain available? One answer is that the monarchy had become uncontroversial. Since the 1830s it had been publicly distanced from electoral and party politics. From 1910 limitation of the House of Lords' powers and George V's relative disengagement (in contrast to his father) from London 'society' made it seem less tied to the aristocracy and plutocracy. The Great War ended its links with the autocratic continental monarchies, and renewed its position as the focus for patriotic sentiment.

Yet if ostensible non-partisanship was a necessary condition of its public status, it is not a sufficient explanation. The monarchy was for many not just a matter of indifference, or simply tolerated: it was positively, enthusiastically, admired. Nor was it – nor could it be – entirely neutral, however much it was removed from public controversies: the royal family's instincts were conservative,²⁴ the sovereign remained supreme governor of the Church of England, and monarchy was the epitome of social inequality and privilege. It was able to be uncontroversial only because organizations which might have been critical or cool chose to treat it as such, overlooking its remaining partisan features.

²² See Nicolson, *KGV*, p. 452, for George V saying that Stamfordham 'taught me how to be a King', and for other examples Prochaska, *Republic of Britain*, pp. 157–60, 162–3, 165–76, 178–9. For the general point see also D. Cannadine, 'From biography to history: writing the modern British monarchy', *Historical Research* 77 (2004), 300–1.

²³ See e.g. Colley, *Britons*, pp. 217–29, and Plunkett, *Queen Victoria*, ch. 1.

²⁴ Remarkably, James, *Spirit Undaunted*, pp. 286, 278, describes George VI as a 'progressive liberal', even a 'radical', presumably because of his earlier association with voluntary social welfare. But that was entirely compatible with Conservatism, and hardly justifies aligning him with Attlee's socialism: see also Prochaska, *Royal Bounty*, pp. 229–47; R. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures. England 1918–1951* (Oxford, 1998), p. 6.

Why was this so? The bodies which approved of the monarchy were not, or not wholly, passive recipients of its messages and symbolism. As Prochaska has argued for voluntary service societies seeking royal patronage, it is misleading to regard such bodies as simply deferential or dazzled. They identified with royalty because they expected benefits for themselves. Most directly, these could be status, publicity, increased donations, or honours for their leaders; but more generally, the benefits were assistance in preserving or promoting conditions and attitudes which upheld or advanced their own purposes. These organizations contributed to the monarchy's public character by projecting on to it what they themselves admired; and the Palace was usually responsive, indeed it commonly arranged for royal individuals to say what particular organizations wanted, provided it was expressed as uncontroversially as possible. Besides hospitals and welfare charities, these bodies included numerous religious, educational, youth and sporting associations, and the patriotic and ex-servicemen's organizations that emerged from the Great War, notably the British Legion. Commercial groups used royal patronage or images to help sell their products, and the Prince of Wales became the first member of the royal family to promote British goods in overseas markets, visiting and speaking at South American trade fairs in 1925 and 1931. The various media gave huge coverage to royalty not just in order to boost their circulations or audiences, but also to underpin their own political and social stances or, for the BBC, public service aims – concerns which, as the newspapers' self-censorship over Edward VIII's affair demonstrated, induced a sense of public responsibility which overrode their journalistic instincts and commercial interests. Most important, to the traditional support from the armed forces, civil and diplomatic services, political government, and Conservative and Liberal parties was now added, contrary to royal suspicions, that of the Labour movement.

Plainly these different organizations did not always approve of the monarchy for the same reasons, but the cumulative effect was to create considerable public expectations about the reputation and behaviour of the royal family. Most of its members understood that royalty had become much less about power and privilege, and much more about public example and service. It was now a vocation, or more prosaically a job in what George VI privately called 'the family firm'.²⁵ The strength of these expectations was shown in November and December 1936.

The public language of monarchy had some notable characteristics. Ceremonial addresses and official documents retained their studied archaisms but after 1918, in accordance with the new demotic conditions,

²⁵ Bradford, *GLT*, n. 5.

most royal speeches and organizational addresses became rather less elevated.²⁶ Even so, royal language remained inflated and generalized, and might be considered so artificial, stylized and obsequious as to be vacuous. Certainly its literal accuracy was slight: it had only loose and selective connections with political and social realities and with the private characters of royal persons. George V, George VI, and even Edward VIII were hardly impressive or accomplished in their own right, yet like their predecessors they were publicly invested with exceptional qualities of knowledge, insight, sympathy, piety and power. Incongruously, again in response to the new democracy, there was also renewed emphasis on the Victorian trope of members of the royal family as also being ‘ordinary’ people. Yet even in their ordinariness they were, it seemed, extraordinary: the perfect family with blissful home lives, outstanding in their hobbies of shooting, stamp-collecting, yachting, riding or gardening.

However, to expect literal meaning from royal language is to misunderstand its purpose, which was not descriptive but exemplary – to express and endorse public values. The more the monarchy had become elevated above sectional controversies, the more convincing and useful it became in symbolizing and universalizing values which most public and voluntary bodies considered essential for the general interest. Consequently, preserving respect or reverence for the monarchy and maintaining idealized images of members of the royal family seemed matters of great public importance, an attitude shared by very nearly all the media: in this period, public criticism of royalty became something close to taboo.²⁷ In commissioning George V’s official biography, Lascelles told Harold Nicolson that the King had been ‘the subject of a myth’ and that his book would ‘have to be mythological’.²⁸ But such attitudes were not, could not be, just manufactured by the Palace or sustained by the government; their sources were wider and more spontaneous. As Tom Jones, the adviser of many public figures, observed just before Edward VIII’s abdication, ‘we invest our rulers with qualities which they do not possess and we connive at the illusion – those of us who know better – because monarchy is an illusion that works’.²⁹

²⁶ As is evident from comparison of the pre-1914 and post-1918 speeches in *The King to His People 1911–35* (London, 1935).

²⁷ See Martin, *Magic of Monarchy*, pp. 9–10. Altrincham’s mild comments in 1957 (like those of Muggeridge in the *New Statesman* a little earlier) attracted remarkable degrees of outrage: P. Brendon and P. Whitehead, *The Windsors* (1994; 2000), pp. 152–4.

²⁸ *Harold Nicolson. Diaries and Letters 1930–1964*, ed. S. Olsen (London, 1980), p. 334. Lascelles added, however, that this meant omission of any discreditable matters, not writing untruths or exaggerations; and despite occasional hyperbole, Nicolson’s biography remains one of the most intelligent books about the modern monarchy.

²⁹ Jones, *Diary with Letters*, p. 291 (8 Dec. 1936).

This is not to argue that the monarchy reflected some 'natural' moral consensus in British society, nor that it could genuinely symbolize the whole nation or empire. The values projected upon and expressed by the monarchy were 'ideological' responses by various groups to particular early twentieth-century conditions.³⁰ Economic and social strains, war mobilization, civilian exposure to bombing, and totalitarian and atheistic threats meant that despite many continuing and new internal disagreements, there was a shared and pressing concern for basic political, social and moral stabilization – obviously so from conservative perspectives, but also within the Labour and other progressive movements which dreaded communism nearly as much as fascism, and which wanted to preserve arrangements and attitudes conducive to reform. Consequently a long-established and conventional monarchical language and symbolism were now renewed or acquired new references. A private comment in 1935 by Beatrice Webb gives one view of the outcome:

The universal popularity of the royal family is the biggest asset of the *status quo* within Great Britain and its Empire. What a political paradox! Powerless puppets saving the face of the British constitution. The King and Queen, the royal dukes and their Duchesses, above all the Prince of Wales, are good souls and do their duty with exemplary piety. How long will they save the situation for western civilization – i.e. capitalist dictatorship plus political democracy, plus a veneer of the Christian faith?³¹

Webb was an admirer of Soviet Russia, but if her more pejorative terms had been toned down only a little and if the *status quo* were taken to mean the institutional and moral framework rather than the distribution of wealth, most public figures of all political persuasions would have accepted the truth of her statement, including the verdict that civilization was at stake. The paradox of a powerless monarchy having great public importance is resolved by understanding its function in expressing and symbolizing public values. Five aspects had particular significance: constitutionalism, social cohesion, the empire, Christian witness, and public morality.

II

Royal and constitutional historians commonly claim that early twentieth-century monarchs retained significant *direct* political influence,



³⁰ So in terms of a celebrated debate, the following argument is closer to N. Birnbaum, 'Monarchs and sociologists', *Sociological Review* 3 (1955), 5–23, than to Shils and Young, 'The meaning of the coronation'.

³¹ Beatrice Webb diary, 9 Feb. 1935 (microfiche edn.).

underpinned by the continued importance of their residual constitutional prerogatives. Yet for contemporaries the key feature of their public position was, as Webb wrote, their lack of power. Historians of government and political leadership, who rarely find it necessary to bring the sovereigns into their explanations, have agreed, with much more justification than commentators on the Victorian period.³² George V and George VI were certainly active, because for them and their secretaries what Bagehot had described as the monarch's rights – consultation, encouragement and warning – were positive duties. They and their secretaries diligently read government papers and collected further advice and information, and sent a stream of enquiry, exhortation, suggestion and sometimes protest to ministers and officials on innumerable large and small subjects. Constitutional niceties and civil service procedures ensured that they were normally kept informed, and that their comments and questions received respectful and considered responses. Nevertheless the quantity of this activity far exceeded its importance and effect. For ministers, parliamentary, party and electoral considerations and their own assessments had long been decisive, and Palace views had influence only where these coincided with these pressures or calculations. Even prime ministerial attentiveness towards the monarch had ceased to be an official or political necessity, and become a matter of personal inclination. Exchanges with the Palace were now routinely handled by private secretaries rather than by ministers themselves.³³ Lloyd George hardly bothered communicating with the Palace at all, and Baldwin never corresponded with the King on business and spoke with him only about every six weeks. Only during the Second World War did Chamberlain and Churchill establish what came to be regarded as a 'tradition' of weekly meetings with the monarch during parliamentary sessions, and then only as a pleasant courtesy and to help keep him informed.³⁴ George V could be awkward and persistent,

³² See Michael Bentley's chapter in the current volume. From publication between 1907 and 1932 of selections from the Queen's correspondence, contemporaries knew that political practice had only recently caught up with constitutional theory (and with Bagehot): see F. Hardie, *The Political Influence of Queen Victoria* (Oxford, 1935); Martin, *Magic of Monarchy*, pp. 46–53; Laski, *Parliamentary Government*, pp. 397–401.

³³ As is evident from prime ministerial files; and for the particular case of the 'King's letters', the traditional daily report from the Commons leader or home secretary on House of Commons proceedings, see *Baldwin Papers. A Conservative Statesman 1908–47*, ed. P. Williamson and E. Baldwin (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 3, 503.

³⁴ Brendon and Whitehead, *The Windsors*, pp. 44–5; Baldwin in Mackenzie King diary, 7 Oct. 1928, online at <http://king.collectionscanada.ca>; James, *Spirit Undaunted*, p. 206. More frequent meetings (usually luncheons) are not in themselves evidence of political significance; and the claims that George VI had 'considerable' influence with Churchill and became 'a major element in government' (*ibid.*, pp. 207–8, 221, 230, 284) are simply incredible: cf. the verdicts in D. Cannadine, 'Churchill and the British monarchy', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6s. 11 (2001), 264, 271.

but he well knew that he had to act according to ministerial advice, and he did not obstruct and wear down ministers as Queen Victoria had done. By 1918 the dangers of public criticism for the monarchy's reputation, privileges and even – as he would have thought – survival seemed all too great; fear of socialism was a powerful constitutional check. The instinct for safety also emasculated the prerogative powers. When during the 1910–14 constitutional deadlocks Liberal and Unionist leaders each pressed him to exercise these powers in their own interest, the King was haunted by the fear that if he took the advice of either he would embitter half the nation; and it was only in the desperate hope of escaping this choice and forcing the politicians to compromise that, paradoxically, he resorted to (empty) threats of ignoring ministerial advice and exercising his ostensible powers. Thereafter, while the Palace guarded the principle and spirit of the prerogative as a guarantee for the monarchy's status, in practice its aim was to avoid the exercise of its powers, or failing that, to minimize the effect. When a possible decision loomed, advice on constitutional principle was sought; but the real purpose of this consultation was political calculation – to ascertain what would cause least controversy and the least harm to the monarchy, and what the leading politicians themselves wanted or would accept responsibility for.³⁵ This is evident in the monarchy's major political acts during this period. In 1923 Baldwin as a member of the House of Commons was manifestly the safer choice as prime minister than Lord Curzon, given that the Labour opposition then lacked any representative in, and was still committed to abolishing, the House of Lords. In August–October 1931, the King certainly helped to establish and perpetuate a 'National' coalition government, but he did so on the well informed and accurate understanding that, given the unusually awkward political circumstances, this was already being considered by the Labour prime minister and leaders of the other parties.³⁶ By the 1940s, George VI and his secretaries welcomed party arrangements and civil service procedures which relieved them of the embarrassment of political choices.³⁷

As was routinely observed at the time, the end of the monarchy's direct political power had been vital for the elevation of its *indirect* political significance: it became a purer symbol of constitutional government.

³⁵ Nicolson, *KGV*, p. 115, sensibly emphasizes the distinction between the historical survival of powers and the political expediency of their exercise.

³⁶ P. Williamson, *National Crisis and National Government 1926–1932* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 152–3, 232, 274, chs. 9, 12, and see the Bogdanor–Williamson exchange in *Twentieth Century British History* 2 (1991), 1–25, 328–43, ignored in V. Bogdanor, *The Monarchy and the Constitution* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 104–12.

³⁷ E.g. James, *Spirit Undaunted*, pp. 305–6, 319–22.

For two centuries the essence of the monarchy's strength had been its personification of a parliamentary constitution in which the 'Crown-in-Parliament' was the sovereign body. This constitution and its associated 'Whig' history of unfolding freedoms had long been at the core of British national identity, and this gave the monarchy broad and deep ideological foundations.³⁸ But two new elements preserved its prestige: its publicly smooth transition into a symbol of parliamentary *democracy*, and a succession of pressures which made constitutional government seem still more precious. During the First World War the King's speeches identified him with the 'cause of freedom, liberty and justice' against tyranny and militarism.³⁹ After 1918 the monarchy symbolized a constitutional system of government which had not only secured military victory, but which in comparison with other European regimes seemed to guarantee stability and liberalism against the threats of both revolution and reaction. During the Labour party advances of the 1920s and 1940s a public absence of royal opposition seemed to confirm that this system was impartial not just between parties, but also between classes and socio-economic doctrines. More fundamentally still, just as in earlier centuries the British constitutional monarchy had represented resistance to foreign despotisms, so during the 1930s and 1940s it became a leading symbol in the defence of democracy against the continental dictatorships.

In these senses, the monarchy remained or became valuable for each of the main political parties. Reduced public discussion about its political role and about the monarch's opinions is indicative. This was due as much to the restraint of the politicians as to that of the monarchs: in contrast to 1910–14, after 1918 the monarchy was too important to be dragged into party politics.⁴⁰ For Conservatives, calls for royal obstruction to a Labour government were not worth the risks of provoking a Labour backlash which might weaken the monarchy's place in the implicit ideological and institutional checks against socialism. Conversely, Labour leaders feared that criticism of the monarchy might stiffen conservative resistance and reduce the opportunities for advancing socialism. Labour attitudes were obviously crucial. The party had never been republican, but before 1914 it contained some outspoken republicans and a larger number of other socialists who disliked the monarchy as the apex of the system of inherited

³⁸ See J. Parry, chapter 2 above; also, from a quite different perspective, T. Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass. Britain and its Monarchy* (London, 1988).

³⁹ *The King to His People*, pp. 66–7, 71–2, 75, 88, 94–6, 110, 117–8.

⁴⁰ The main, but only momentary, exceptions were Asquith in late 1923 and Lloyd George in early 1929, because royal intervention after indecisive general elections had become one of the last hopes for the Liberal party's return to government: M. Cowling, *The Impact of Labour 1920–1924* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 351; Lloyd George speech discussed in Stamfordham to Vansittart, 29 April 1929, Royal Archives PS/GV/K.2223.11.

privilege. In 1910 its parliamentary leaders pointedly treated the King's civil list as if it represented the income of 'a President of a Republic'. In 1936 and 1937 their successors again wanted reduction of the monarchy's costs.⁴¹ But only a handful of (mainly Scottish) left-wing MPs called for its abolition, and the reallocation of its palaces, wealth and income to the poor.⁴² Most Labour politicians took it for granted that the monarchy was popular among the working population, and regarded changes to its status as a lower priority than economic and social reform. The more republican members assumed that it would wither away as socialism advanced, and for the meantime considered a hereditary non-partisan monarch less inconvenient than an elected, politicized, president.⁴³ But the chief reason for the Labour party's acceptance of the monarchy, and for some of its members being monarchists, was its absorption of a long tradition of popular constitutionalism and its understanding that monarchs no longer governed and were not an obstacle to further political and social progress. Faith in and commitment to established political procedures outweighed objections to the monarchy as the embodiment of social inequalities.⁴⁴ It was assumed that just as monarchs in the past had acted on Liberal and Conservative ministerial advice, so they would accept the advice of Labour ministers; only if any obstruction were attempted might the monarchy's position be reassessed.⁴⁵ As is well-attested, the Palace's attitude towards the first Labour government was vital. In 1923–4, George V and Stamfordham did not want socialists as the King's ministers, and only after unco-operative Conservative and Liberal decisions made this inescapable did they decide that it would be wise to treat Labour leaders with an elaborate display of accommodation, trust and friendliness. The tactic was highly successful. For working-class ministers and their families it sealed their sense of arrival and achievement, and for the Labour

⁴¹ *House of Commons Debates*, 5th. series [HCDeb] 19, c. 1627–40 (Barnes, 22 July 1910); 311, cc. 1590–5, 1615–21, 1634 (Pethick-Lawrence and Cripps, 5 May 1936); 324, cc. 40–5, 72–7, 455–60 (Attlee and Pethick-Lawrence, 24 May, and Greenwood, 27 May 1937).

⁴² E.g. HCDeb, 311, cc. 1603–15, 1637–52 (5 May 1936); 318, cc. 2191–6, 2206–12, 2218–9 (10–11 Dec. 1936); 324, cc. 49–56 (24 May 1937).

⁴³ E.g. S. and B. Webb, *A Constitution for the Socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain* (London, 1920), pp. 108–10; Lansbury in *Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1923*, p. 251, and see Prochaska, *Republic of Britain*, pp. 188–9.

⁴⁴ R. McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class. Social Relations in Britain 1880–1950* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 17–27; N. Kirk, 'The conditions of royal rule: Australian and British socialist and labour attitudes to the monarchy 1901–11', *Social History* 30 (2005), 64–88; and see N. Owen, 'MacDonald's parties: the Labour party and the "aristocratic embrace" 1922–31', *Twentieth Century British History* 18 (2007), 1–53, at 9–16.

⁴⁵ This was the purport of the only significant interwar public admonitions to monarchs from leading Labour politicians, in 1924 and 1934: R. Postgate, *George Lansbury* (London, 1951), pp. 224–5, and C. Cook, *Stafford Cripps* (London, 1957), pp. 159–60.

party it seemed the ultimate endorsement of its own legitimacy, fitness to govern and right to seek reform.⁴⁶ It now seemed fully in the party's interest to subscribe to the principle – more accurately, a convenient fiction – that monarchs were entirely neutral in their personal political opinions, and to observe the convention that ministers should not divulge their sometimes strongly expressed views. Labour leaders made little of some socialist intellectuals' charges that the 1931 National government was 'born of a Palace Revolution'. Nor did they (any more than did the Liberal and Conservative anti-appeasers) criticize George VI's very public support for Chamberlain after the Munich agreement.⁴⁷

The apotheosis of the monarchy as the symbol of democratic constitutionalism came in the mid 1930s. An official theme for George V's Jubilee in May 1935 was celebration of the 'constitutional progress' during his reign,⁴⁸ but implicitly and often explicitly a further message was comparison with the regimes of Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin. The King's address to Parliament declared that 'the perfect harmony of our Parliamentary system with our Constitutional Monarchy' had been found to be the 'best way to secure government by the people, freedom for the individual, the ordered strength of the state and the rule of law over governors and governed alike'.⁴⁹ Ministers and opposition leaders presented constitutional monarchy as a barrier to dictatorship,⁵⁰ and the remarkable popular enthusiasm for Jubilee events was attributed partly to 'the people realizing the contrast between the homely ways of the King and the bullying of the continental despots'.⁵¹ On George V's death it was not

⁴⁶ It should, however, be recorded that while the often-quoted account of the King's reception of his new Cabinet in J. R. Clynes, *Memoirs* (London, 1937), i. 343–4, no doubt accurately reflected Clynes's sentiments, these 'memoirs' were actually written by Frank Stuart, a professional ghost-writer: Stuart to Gilmour, 26 Aug. 1937, Gilmour papers GD383/69/16, National Archives of Scotland.

⁴⁷ The King was plainly imprudent in early October 1938, and was nearly even more so: James, *Spirit Undaunted*, p. 144. But the claim that his actions were 'unconstitutional' originated much later, with John Grigg in 1989: A. Roberts, *Eminent Churchillians* (London, 1994), p. 21.

⁴⁸ MacDonald to Wigram, 21 Feb. 1935, PREM 1/173. There is no evidence for a common assumption that the National government planned the jubilee specifically in order to boost its re-election prospects (e.g. Rose, *KGI*, p. 394). Ministerial files show that care was taken to avoid party-political implications and to involve all major parties in jubilee events. Moreover, at the time of the jubilee a general election was not due for another seventeen months; only in October did Baldwin decide on an earlier election, in the unexpected conditions created by the Abyssinian war. But as Jonathan Parry suggests (above p. 70), the decision was probably connected more generally with the government's claim to be a 'National', non-party, arrangement.

⁴⁹ *His Majesty's Speeches. The Record of the Silver Jubilee* (London, 1935), pp. 50–1, and see the Lords and Commons addresses, pp. 42, 43.

⁵⁰ Baldwin in *Times*, 4 May 1935; other party leaders in *HCDeb* 301, cc. 977–87 (8 May 1935), 308, c. 17 (23 Jan. 1936); and Martin, *Magic of Monarchy*, p. 15.

⁵¹ Jones, *Diary with Letters*, p. 148 (20 May 1935).

Conservative or Liberal politicians but the Labour leader, Attlee, who praised him as a 'democrat'.⁵² At the 1937 coronation, which received the same blanket coverage in the Labour movement's newspaper, the *Daily Herald*, as in the conservative popular press, Labour spokesmen described the institution itself as democratic: 'the monarchy exists by the will of the British people'.⁵³ During the Second World War the anti-fascist crusade, an all-party coalition government, and Churchill's constitutionalist rhetoric cemented this identification of monarchy with democracy and freedom. Major Crown honours, first accepted by trade-union leaders in 1935, now began to cascade through the party.⁵⁴ There was simply no reason to withhold support from an institution that proclaimed many political values admired by the Labour party, and which represented a parliamentary system which from 1945 ensured consent to socialist legislation. As the *Daily Herald* had declared in 1937, the monarchy symbolized the 'underlying unity of a community in agreement, not about everything, but about the political method by which everything will be decided'.⁵⁵

It was in these terms that the 'abdication crisis' seemed alarming, yet passed so easily. The issue was not any attempt by Edward VIII to revive royal power, nor political differences with his ministers. His views on peace, Anglo-German friendship and social issues were virtually identical with those of his father, and indeed his successor – and, more to the point, with those of most Cabinet members. He was less discreet than his father, but his notorious phrases that 'something should [must, will] be done' about South Wales unemployment were uncalculated and became significant only when they were exploited by anti-government newspapers, for which he expressed regret.⁵⁶ If ministers heard of his occasional

⁵² *HCD* 308, c. 16 (23 Jan. 1936). ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 324, c. 457 (27 May 1937).

⁵⁴ Some trade union leaders had accepted the lesser OBE awards instituted in 1917, but Citrine's and Pugh's 1935 knighthoods had been controversial. The 1924 and 1929–31 Labour governments had recommended the creation of several peers, but for the practical purpose of conducting House of Lords business; only after 1940 were peerages accepted as 'honours': see P. Williamson, 'The Labour party and the House of Lords 1918–31', *Parliamentary History* 10 (1991), 317–41.

⁵⁵ *Daily Herald*, 13 May 1937. It is commonly stated that during the debate on the Abdication Bill in December 1936, some 100 MPs would have voted for a republic if the Labour party had allowed a free Commons vote; but this is one of those persistent misunderstandings which beset accounts of the modern monarchy. The story can be traced back through Wheeler-Bennett, *KGVI*, p. 299, to C. Petrie, *Monarchy in the Twentieth Century* (1952), p. 111. But Petrie had misread his source, which not only has the lower figure of 40 to 50 MPs but offered these numbers as a 'fancy', a speculation – and this from a hostile, right-wing, Conservative MP: see C. Petrie, *The Modern British Monarchy* (1961), pp. 24, 177, this time correctly citing A. Wilson, *Thoughts and Talks* (1938), p. 246. No other source indicates division among or pressure on Labour MPs over the relevant vote, on an ILP republican amendment supported by just seven MPs.

⁵⁶ Cabinet minutes, 27 Nov. 1936, in *Baldwin Papers*, p. 396. The King used different versions of the phrase (should, must, will) in statements at different stopping places

offhand boasts about imposing his will in government, they knew from his lack of application to state business how empty such statements were: compared to George V, he was in these terms very much a lightweight. Pressed by Mrs Simpson, he did make suggestions for keeping himself on the throne, but he himself never seriously resisted Baldwin's opinion that marriage required his abdication. Nor did he countenance a political campaign on his own behalf. Rather, the real danger lay elsewhere: that anti-government mavericks like Churchill and the Beaverbrook and Rothermere newspapers, or the anti-parliamentary fascists and communists, might make the King's wishes an issue for political division, in effect if not intention reviving royal independence in public affairs and, at a time of international difficulties, distracting government and the nation with constitutional disputes. It was towards forestalling this type of political division that Baldwin directed his efforts, particularly by ensuring it was made plain that the King himself chose abdication rather than renunciation of Mrs Simpson. Like almost every other public body, the Labour party took the strictest constitutional view: that irrespective of opinions about the King's proposed marriage and despite its own hostility towards the National government, it was vital to uphold the principles of ministerial authority and parliamentary supremacy. The *Daily Herald* even argued that any other course 'might easily lead to fascism', and stigmatized public demonstrations in the King's favour as 'anti-democratic'.⁵⁷ The most significant political feature of the episode is that there was, after all, no real crisis; the speed and completeness of Baldwin's success testifies to the enormous importance attached to constitutionalism, the more so in an ideologically tense period.

III

Total war and chronic economic difficulties gave renewed momentum to the traditional conception of the monarchy as a focus and force for social cohesion. With the mass mobilization of the First World War, through appeals for volunteers, exhortations to conscripts and civilian workers,

during his tour (*Daily Herald* and *Daily Mail*, 19, 20 Nov. 1936), but except for a critical comment in MacDonald diary, 21 Nov. 1936, these passed unremarked by ministers until the *Daily Mail* used them several days later for its own purposes: Baldwin in Jones, *Diary with Letters*, p. 288 (25 Nov. 1936). The King had already said he would abdicate, and privately he blamed the Welsh unemployment problems not on the government but on local 'socialists' and 'bolshevism': R. Rhodes James, *Victor Cazaret* (London, 1976), p. 186 (diary, 19 Nov. 1936). For the King's distinctly callow political views, see Donaldson, *ELIII*, pp. 191–206, 253–6, and Ziegler, *KEI III*, pp. 182–6, 204–11, 266–75.

⁵⁷ *Daily Herald*, 5, 7, 10 Dec. 1936: it attributed the demonstrations to incitement by the British Union of Fascists and the Communist party.

investitures, hospital and factory visits, and messages to bereaved families, the royal family touched the lives of more people than ever before. From evoking patriotism and endurance for a united war effort and then leading national acts of remembrance for the war dead, there were easy transitions to appealing for united efforts in post-war reconstruction and later in mitigating the effects of unemployment. In the face of industrial unrest and social distress, governments and voluntary organizations were as eager to exploit the monarchy's ability to inspire loyalty and co-operation as the Palace was to demonstrate its social relevance. Precisely because class conflict and social alienation were feared, royal rhetoric presented 'the people' as united and wanting still closer 'brotherhood' or 'fellowship'.⁵⁸ Speeches and commentaries, as well as royal visits and patronage, systematically created an impression of closeness between the monarchy and the working population. Royal persons were said to share the 'hopes and joys, and fears and sorrows' of all classes of 'the people',⁵⁹ and were, it seemed, prodigious in their 'deep' or 'constant' interest in medical, child-care, educational, housing, sanitation, industrial, scientific and artistic schemes. For the royal family it was important that their eldest son, like the sons of other families, could be said to have 'shared with My Armies the dangers and hardships of the campaign'.⁶⁰ Famously, the Prince of Wales was later projected as a champion of ex-servicemen and the unemployed, particularly as patron of the British Legion and the National Council of Social Service.⁶¹ But by the 1930s, building upon a long tradition, encouragement and appeals for those in distress – the sentiments that 'something must be done' – were expected not just from any one royal individual but from the whole royal family, supporting both voluntary organizations and the National government's private-public partnership schemes. George V's Jubilee broadcast declared that 'I grieve to think of the numbers of my people who are still without work. We owe to them . . . all the sympathy and help that we can give. I hope that . . . all who can will do their utmost to find them work and bring them hope'. The purpose of his son's Jubilee Trust, to assist youth welfare organizations, was chosen to commemorate the 'devotion to the welfare of the people which His Majesty has personified supremely throughout

⁵⁸ E.g. *The King to His People*, pp. 95, 156–8, 280–3, 308–9.

⁵⁹ E.g. Lord Halifax in *Times*, 4 May 1935; MacDonald in *HCDeb*, 301, cc. 979–80 (8 May 1935).

⁶⁰ *The King to His People*, p. 53. There was no indication that, to Prince Edward's own dismay, he was kept away from military action. Curiously, Prince Albert's service in the navy (which included battle experience) and later in the air force went unmentioned in the King's collected public statements, presumably to preserve the focus on his heir.

⁶¹ Though see Prochaska, *Royal Bounty*, pp. 190, 196, 201–4, 210, for a gap between public image and personal commitment.

his reign'.⁶² Edward VIII's replacement by George VI did not change this style of presentation, because the former Duke of York had as considerable a record as his brother of 'keen interest in social questions'.⁶³ And the new King and his Queen soon acquired a public cult of their own. The Second World War had an even greater effect than the first in identifying the monarchy with a genuinely national purpose, and the Queen proved at least Edward's equal in conveying spontaneous human interest. The story that after the bombing of Buckingham Palace in September 1940, she said that she now felt she could 'look the East End in the face' is apocryphal;⁶⁴ nevertheless this does capture the royal family's determination, amplified by official propaganda, to be seen to share the dangers and privations of the 'people's war', and to set an example of fortitude and defiance.

For a leading Conservative in 1935, the Crown was 'symbolic of all the persons and things that together compose the life of our nation . . . and speaks of the essential unity that is greater than all the accidental differences that may exist between us'.⁶⁵ Again, statements by Labour politicians reveal the widespread absorption of such attitudes. Lansbury spoke of how the royal family's social sympathies had helped break down Labour suspicions that 'the Monarchy would preserve for ever the domination of class'. After George V's death, Attlee described him not just as a 'democrat' but still more surprisingly as a 'real social reformer', who had 'recognized the claims of social justice'.⁶⁶ For the Labour leaders monarchy had, it seems, become compatible with their party's commitment to social equality. They did treat the abdication as an opportunity for a 'new start', but they meant only that the monarchy should be made more accessible and still more popular. Occasional and 'reasonable' pageantry was desirable, but continual ritual and the 'narrow and privileged' courtier class hampered the monarch's true work. In 1937 they proposed an enquiry into the royal family's 'mode of life', on the principle that 'utmost simplicity in the monarchy, . . . will . . . bind together the people and the Monarch

⁶² *The King to his People*, p. 299; National Council of Social Services memo., Jan. 1935, PREM 1/173, and more generally Prochaska, *Royal Bounty*, chs. 6–7.

⁶³ *Crown and Empire. The Coronation of King George VI* (*Times*, 1937), pp. 8–9.

⁶⁴ The source is not contemporary, but a sentimental biography by an author who became a court correspondent only after the war had ended: B. S. Shew, *Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother* (London, 1955), p. 76. The phrase was lent authority by Wheeler-Bennett, *KGVI*, p. 470.

⁶⁵ Halifax, *Times*, 4 May 1935.

⁶⁶ *HC Deb* 301, c. 981 (8 May 1935); 308, c. 17 (23 Jan. 1936), and see Laski, *Parliamentary Government*, p. 392, for the cynical observation that 'the Monarchy . . . has been sold to the democracy as a symbol of itself'.



Figure 8.2. The royal family as 'ordinary' and domestic: 'Conversation piece at the Royal Lodge', 1950, by Sir James Gunn (National Portrait Gallery).

more closely than before'.⁶⁷ Ten years later, they presumably thought that war and austerity had effected these changes. In the depths of post-war economic crisis, Labour ministers agreed that Princess Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh should have a full ceremonial wedding and, against opposition from their own backbench MPs, a generous civil list. According to Attlee, 'our British monarchy today . . . is in essence simple . . . and

⁶⁷ Attlee, Pethick-Lawrence and Greenwood in *HCD* 318, cc. 2204-5 (11 Dec. 1936), and 324, cc. 40-5, 72-7, 455-60 (24, 27 May 1937).

approachable', and the couple needed the money to do what the general public wanted them to do, 'visiting round the country . . . [and] coming into contact with the people'.⁶⁸

Symbolizing and cementing unity was a still more insistent theme in relation to the Empire and Commonwealth. The zenith of the imperial monarchy is usually placed in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, but the association of monarchy and Empire actually increased after 1914. On the one hand, the two world wars showed the extent to which British international power and even national defence now depended on imperial resources, and during the interwar years and again after 1945 both British and Dominion governments regarded an imperial trade and sterling bloc as the chief means of escape from economic depression. Yet on the other hand, the Dominions and India were obtaining greater self-government and had stronger nationalist movements. As a more challenging world made the overseas empire more valuable, so a 'non-political', supra-national and liberal monarchy was considered vital for preserving the sense of imperial unity. Within Britain itself, organizations, events and media aiming to stimulate popular imperial sentiment continued to proliferate, and to be leading vehicles for publicizing the monarchy's importance.⁶⁹

The belief that the Empire depended on the monarchy was as central for George V's and his advisers' strategy of royal survival as the display of social benevolence.⁷⁰ At the Unionist government's urging, he himself had as Prince of Wales been sent around the Dominions in 1901 and to India in 1905–6 in order to make the Crown and empire visible to their populations, and in 1911 he insisted on attending the Indian Durbar. From 1919 to 1925 he sent his eldest son on even longer Dominion and Indian tours to capitalize on and consolidate wartime imperial patriotism. The King privately disliked the increasing concessions made towards self-government, yet because his various governments used the monarchy to endorse the Empire's re-constitution and publicize its revised ideology, the effect of these concessions was to enhance his own status. The 1926 Balfour formula and 1931 Statute of Westminster 'exalted' the monarch by making him king of each Dominion, leaving the sovereign as the sole constitutional link between Britain and the Dominions, and declared

⁶⁸ Ibid. 445, cc. 1745–7 (17 Dec. 1947); B. Pimlott, *The Queen. A Biography of Elizabeth II* (London, 1996), pp. 125–32, 146–8. The 160 dissident Labour MPs were hardly radical: they wanted only a lower grant, not complete rejection. Nor did the Labour government curb the royal family's tax exemptions: see P. Hall, *Royal Fortune* (London, 1992).

⁶⁹ See J. M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire* (Manchester, 1984).

⁷⁰ E.g. 1918 statements in Prochaska, *Republic of Britain*, p. 169, and Wheeler-Bennett, *KGVII*, pp. 159–60.

the new Commonwealth to be united by its 'common allegiance' to the Crown. Against the Congress party's demand for Indian independence, the King-Emperor was similarly elevated as the focus of allegiance for the various princes, provinces, races and religious groups within new all-India political structures.⁷¹ Baldwin expressed the conventional view during Jubilee week:

If in any cataclysm the Crown vanished, the Empire would vanish with it . . . [No] political party . . . would hold together an Empire scattered throughout the world and that great Indian Empire besides. More and more as the older [Imperial] ties became attenuated, the ties of the Crown become stronger and more personal every year.⁷²

Royal speeches welcomed self-government while speaking of indissoluble imperial links, links which would become stronger because now based on co-operation and shared ideals: the Empire-Commonwealth was a 'great instrument for justice, peace and goodwill'.⁷³ The 1935 Jubilee was staged as much to proclaim Dominion and Indian 'devotion and affection' for the King as to celebrate national cohesion,⁷⁴ and when on his deathbed he supposedly asked 'How is the Empire?', this was treated as hugely significant: it was even, unlike most royal stories, 'very nearly true'.⁷⁵

In 1919 Stamfordham had told the Prince of Wales that 'the throne is the pivot upon which the Empire will more than ever hinge. Its strength and stability will depend entirely on its occupant'.⁷⁶ When in late 1936 King Edward, supposedly much impressed by his imperial tours, remained unmoved by appeals to the importance of Dominion opinion, this came as a shock. The marriage proposal and then the abdication had potentially harmful consequences for imperial relations, even aside from the Irish government immediately exploiting the episode to reduce its constitutional links with Britain still further. In public, the only possible course was to pretend that nothing had happened. In his coronation broadcast George VI declared that he had 'felt . . . that the whole Empire was in very truth gathered within the walls of the Abbey'. Royal tours of

⁷¹ Nicolson, *KGVI*, pp. 479–82, 485; N. Mansergh, *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs. Problems of External Policy 1931–1939* (Oxford, 1952), pp. 31, 35–6, 47; D. Cannadine, *Ornamentalism* (London, 2001), pp. 54–6.

⁷² *Times*, 4 May 1935.

⁷³ *The King to his People*, pp. 67, 207, 248–51, 270, 274, 295.

⁷⁴ *Record of the Silver Jubilee*, pp. 14–17, 27–38.

⁷⁵ For the stages by which an incoherent word was transformed into an internationally famous phrase, see *In Royal Service*, pp. 197–8; *Reith Diaries*, p. 185, and S. Baldwin, *Service of our Lives* (London, 1937), pp. 17–18.

⁷⁶ Ziegler, *KEVIII*, p. 114.

the Dominions resumed, beginning with Canada in 1939 and only postponed by the war; the King became patron of the Empire Day movement, and he spoke of ‘a new vision’ of an Empire of ‘free peoples’ opposed to ‘the spirit of domination and the lust of conquest’.⁷⁷ Even when the Empire began to vanish in the late 1940s, with India becoming a republic and the King-Emperor turned into ‘Head of the Commonwealth’, to all appearances this was not loss but evolution. In Churchill’s broadcast on George VI’s death, the crown was ‘the magic link . . . which unites our loosely bound but strongly interwoven Commonwealth of nations’; indeed the character of the sovereign was ‘vital to the future . . . of world freedom and peace’. In public presentation, at the 1953 coronation the monarchy was no less an expression of British leadership of a ‘fellowship’ of nations than it had been at the 1935 Jubilee.⁷⁸

The monarchy’s function of symbolizing unity was made more effective by two additional elements. The pressures on social cohesion, on the Empire and on the monarchy itself stimulated further development of the traditional metaphors of the king as father, the nation and Empire as families, and the royal family as emblematic of all ordinary families. Even more than during the previous century, royalty’s own family occasions – weddings, births, anniversaries, funerals – were presented as public events, encouraging in ways that Bagehot would have recognized ‘a curious process of identification of royal family life with the individual life of the subject’.⁷⁹ But what especially evoked this sense of closeness was the use of radio. The earliest royal broadcasts were for the imperial service, and the BBC wanted a King’s message on the family occasion of Christmas because it would reach exceptionally large and susceptible audiences.⁸⁰ With monarchs able to speak to millions of people in their homes, the speech writers saturated the broadcasts with personal pronouns and family references: ‘I would like to think that you . . . and all the peoples of this Realm and Empire are bound to me and to one another by the spirit of one great family’.⁸¹ Commenting on George V’s last Christmas message in his own imperial broadcast on the King’s death, Baldwin made the extraordinary assertions that ‘it is as members of a family that we are

⁷⁷ *King George VI to His Peoples* (London, 1952), pp. 2, 7–9, 22–4; MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire*, pp. 234–5.

⁷⁸ *The Listener*, 14 Feb. 1952, and see Elizabeth II’s first two Christmas broadcasts in *Voices out of the Air*, pp. 70–4.

⁷⁹ Martin, *Magic of Monarchy*, p. 15; see W. Bagehot, *The English Constitution*, ed. M. Taylor (Oxford, 2001), p. 41.

⁸⁰ MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire*, pp. 91–3; P. Scannell and D. Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting 1922–1939* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 7, 29, 280–6.

⁸¹ 1934, in *Voices out of the Air*, p. 14, but see all his and George VI’s Christmas broadcasts, pp. 11–18, 28–60.

mourning him' and that 'there must be millions who feel as I do that a wise and loving friend and counsellor has been taken from us'. More remarkably still, this had some truth: as Labour commentators observed, among the general public large numbers appeared to feel something akin to personal loss.⁸²

IV

Secularization has made it difficult to appreciate the continued significance of religion in public life during the early twentieth century. Until the 1960s, Britain remained a Christian nation. Total church membership reached its historic peak in the 1900s and declined only slowly, with recoveries in the late 1920s and the 1950s; and although a large majority of the population were not regular church-goers, most retained Christian beliefs, respected Christian moral rules and observed the churches' rites of passage.⁸³ The monarchy's Christian witness and identification with the established English and Scottish churches remained important for the nation's explicitly Christian life, and royal rituals were at the core of a more diffuse 'civil religion';⁸⁴ while for all the churches, the pressures of growing secularization and challenges from fascist paganism and communist atheism made the monarchy's example seem still more valuable. The royal family was upheld as a model of Christian fidelity, charity, probity, and domestic virtue. Prayers for the sovereign and singing of the national anthem – 'God Save the King' – were still part of common experience. Much royal philanthropic endeavour was emblematic of religious values, and the connection was made still clearer by the revival in 1932, for the first time since 1698, of the sovereign personally distributing alms at the annual Royal Maundy service.⁸⁵ Many royal ceremonies were also national religious events, and the coronations, deaths and funerals of

⁸² Baldwin, *Service*, pp. 11–12; Attlee in *HC Deb* 308, c. 15 (23 Jan. 1936); *New Statesman*, 25 Jan. 1936.

⁸³ C. G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London, 2001); R. Currie, A. Gilbert and L. Horsley, *Churches and Churchgoers* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 28–33; McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, pp. 272–6, 289–92.

⁸⁴ See I. Bradley, *God Save the Queen. The Spiritual Dimension of Monarchy* (London, 2002), esp. pp. x–xiii and ch. 6; R. Boccock, 'Religion in modern Britain', in R. Boccock and K. Thompson (eds.), *Religion and Ideology* (Manchester, 1985), pp. 210–11, 219, 266, 231; J. Wolfe, 'The religions of the silent majority', in G. Parsons (ed.), *The Growth of Religious Diversity*, vol. 1 (London, 1993), pp. 309–10, 318–27.

⁸⁵ See *Times*, 22–24, 26 March 1932 and B. Robinson, *Silver Pennies and Linen Towels. The Story of the Royal Maundy* (London, 1992), pp. 41–50. The ceremony had long been left to the sovereign's clerical representative, the Lord High Almoner, but the King's mother and sister attended during the Great War and after 1932 members of the royal family were normally present. Edward performed the distribution in 1936 and George VI in 1940, and since 1944 it has been an almost annual sovereign's occasion.



Figure 8.3. The Christian monarchy: 'The Coronation ceremony of His Most Gracious Majesty King George V in Westminster Abbey, 22 June 1911', by J.H.F. Bacon (National Portrait Gallery).

sovereigns evoked both church appeals for reaffirmed Christian commitment and, it seemed, considerable evidence of continuing popular Christian belief.⁸⁶ During the First World War there was a revival of national days of prayer – united appeals for divine intercession during extraordinary national anxieties, or thanksgiving for divine assistance after reliefs or victories – which had fallen into abeyance since the 1850s. The King 'called his people to prayer'; the royal family usually attended a state service at St Paul's Cathedral or Westminster Abbey, accompanied by the nation's other leaders; and churches throughout the nation and empire were crowded for special acts of worship. During the Second World War, national days of prayer became frequent – usually twice a year – and the last one, a call for national re-dedication in the face of economic difficulties, was approved by the Labour government in 1947.⁸⁷ All this carried greater force from the traditional British Protestant doctrine that the nation and its monarchy enjoyed exceptional divine favour. Coronations were presented as national re-consecrations, renewing the sacred

⁸⁶ M. Grimley, *Citizenship, Community and the Church of England* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 184–93, and see J. Wolfe, *Great Deaths* (Oxford, 2000), chs. 8–9, for these effects associated with sovereigns' funerals from Victoria to George VI.

⁸⁷ Aside from those during the wars and in 1947, a day of prayer was called during the 1931–2 economic slump and two more during and after the 1938 Czechoslovakian crisis. For 1947 see P. Howarth, *George VI* (London, 1987), p. 204.

qualities of the nation's institutions and 'the organic union of the people and their sovereign under divine providence'.⁸⁸ As the Dean of Durham wrote in 1937, it was 'no mere accident that the one royal house which has been for a century consistently true to its Master's teaching is the one which has survived a century of unrest with ever growing honour'.⁸⁹ The kings themselves customarily spoke in quasi-priestly terms, bestowing God's blessings, invoking God's help, offering thanks to God.⁹⁰ George VI was especially fervent, overcoming his hatred of broadcasting twice for national days of prayer, and again to call for special prayers on D-Day: 'we dare to believe that God has used our Nation and Empire as an instrument for fulfilling His high purpose'.⁹¹

Notwithstanding the sovereign being supreme governor of the Church of England, the other religious denominations had long shared the admiration for the monarchy, and successive modern sovereigns, notably Queen Victoria, had given indications of reciprocating this regard.⁹² This convergence continued, reinforcing the monarchy's representative character and making it more ecumenical. George V and George VI were devout yet undoctinaire in their faith, ready to encourage closer relations between the various churches and, as they saw it, to solidify their allegiance; and in a spiritually more threatening world, the denominations themselves sought closer association with a Christian king as reinforcement for their own efforts and as confirmation of their integration into national life. In 1910 George V successfully backed a movement to modify the statutory 'Protestant declaration' in his parliamentary accession oath, removing the imprecations against Catholic doctrines likely to offend the Roman Catholic populations of the Empire.⁹³ Although originally national days of prayer had strictly concerned only the established

⁸⁸ G. Martin, *Past Futures* (Toronto, 2004), pp. 28, 170; C. Longley, *Chosen People* (London, 2002), ch. 2; Bradley, *God Save the Queen*, ch. 2; and for evidence of substantial popular belief that God and sovereign were linked, see Ziegler, *Crown and People*, p. 36.

⁸⁹ C. A. Alington et. al., *Sermons for the Coronation of . . . King Edward VIII* (London, 1936), pp. 16–17. A Church of England collection of model sermons was published as part of the preparations for each (planned) coronation from 1902 to 1953.

⁹⁰ See most pages of *The King to His People* and *George VI to His Peoples*.

⁹¹ *George VI to His Peoples*, pp. 24, 38–9; *Times*, 30 March 1942; Wheeler-Bennett, *KGVI*, pp. 449–50, 597–8, 607–8. Similarly, in an acclaimed broadcast (drafted by Bishop Woods of Lichfield, Lascelles, and Churchill) his Queen spoke of 'the creative and dynamic force of Christianity' as the vital basis for post-war reconstruction: *Times*, 12 April 1943; *King's Counsellor. Abdication and War. The Diaries of Sir Alan Lascelles*, ed. D. Hart-Davis (London, 2006), pp. 121–3.

⁹² Her partiality for the presbyterian Church of Scotland was well known, but for her open-mindedness towards even non-Christian religions (but not atheists), see W. Arnstein, 'Queen Victoria and religion', in G. Malmgreen (ed.), *Religion in the Lives of English Women 1760–1930* (London, 1986), pp. 112–21.

⁹³ Nicolson, *KGVI*, pp. 162–3; Longley, *Chosen People*, pp. 56–8, 61.

churches, the Free Churches and the Roman Catholic Churches, and indeed the Jewish community, came to observe them in their own ways. In 1917, during the Palace's reassessment of the monarchy's role, Archbishop Davidson persuaded the King himself to take over the public initiative in calling days of prayer on the grounds that this would 'evoke enthusiastic support' from 'religious people of all denominations', people on whom the King 'might have to rely in hours of national strain and confusion',⁹⁴ and thereafter, on the King's behalf, the archbishops made them truly national by routinely consulting the other religious leaders in advance. When after the 1918 armistice George V became the first sovereign to worship at a Free Church service, their leaders regarded this as a historic lifting of 'the social stigma' on their denominations. They successfully lobbied for participation in the 1935 royal jubilee service (the Free Church Federal Council president read a lesson), and received places in the ceremonial processions at the 1937 and 1953 coronations – though they remained disappointed that these were still Anglican rather than fully 'national' occasions.⁹⁵ Matters were easier with the Scottish churches. In 1929–30 the Duke of York became the first member of the royal family to be appointed Lord High Commissioner to the Church of Scotland in order to mark its reunion with the Free Church of Scotland, and in 1953 the Moderator of its General Assembly, as representative of the nation's second established church, became the first non-Anglican to participate in a post-Reformation English coronation service.

A considerable weight of religious expectation lay upon the sovereign. Archbishop Lang was probably right in saying that the British people felt that George V's 'life was founded, as they instinctively desire the life of themselves and of their country to be founded – on the faith and fear of God'.⁹⁶ In some sense the monarch's religion was regarded as standing for that of the whole nation, or as Baldwin expressed it in social terms to George VI:

⁹⁴ Davidson to Stamfordham, 21 April 1917, Archbishop Davidson papers 6 19, Lambeth Palace Library.

⁹⁵ *Christian World*, 21 Nov. 1918; J. Marchant, *Dr John Clifford* (London, 1924), p. 235; correspondence with Gilmour, Wigram, and Rev. S. Berry, 4–16 Feb. 1935, Archbishop Lang papers 36/46, 54–6, 78–9, Lambeth Palace Library; E. K. H. Jordan, *Free Church Unity* (London, 1956), pp. 152, 217–8. From the 1887 jubilee, a small number of Free Church representatives were invited to attend great royal services, but had been allocated seats only at a distance from the actual ritual. The Archbishops were more accommodating at the state funerals of monarchs (Wolffe, *Great Deaths*, pp. 89–93, 260, 269), and were keen that the Christmas broadcast should remain undenominational, rather than tied in with any Anglican service: Bishops meeting, 20–21 Oct. 1937.

⁹⁶ Lang in *Record of the Silver Jubilee*, n. 12.

the average working man likes to spend Sunday morning in bed reading the newspaper, if possible to the accompaniment of a pint of beer. But he says to himself all the time, 'Well, anyhow, I am glad that the King and Queen are going to Church even if I am not doing it myself this morning'.⁹⁷

A king who 'knows little . . . and cares little, about the Church' was always likely to stumble into difficulties. It was Edward VIII's failure to attend church regularly that prompted the famous rebuke of Bishop Blunt, which gave the newspapers their pretext for revealing his relationship with Mrs Simpson.⁹⁸

Christian witness was not the only way in which the monarchy remained, in Bagehot's term, 'the head of our morality'. A royal household official, the Lord Chamberlain, was still responsible for theatre censorship, and George V had more direct influence here than in most other public matters. He also commented freely to government ministers on issues of public morality. His expressions of 'disgust' at newspaper reports of 'gross' intimate details in divorce cases made some contribution towards 1926 legislation which prohibited publication of 'indecent matter' from judicial proceedings.⁹⁹ Disapproval of matrimonial irregularity itself was still more evident. 'Guilty parties' in divorces were excluded from Palace functions until at least the late 1950s, except that – perhaps after a divorcé was included in the first Labour Cabinet – divorced government ministers were invited in their official rather than personal capacities. Even 'innocent parties' were only admitted from the late 1920s, and only after they had submitted their divorce decree and even the case proceedings for inspection by the Lord Chamberlain's office, as proof that their own behaviour really had been irreproachable. Mrs Simpson certainly knew about this royal convention: before her presentation at court in 1931, she had to submit the records of her first divorce.¹⁰⁰

By the standards of the time, most politicians were not especially censorious about sexual and marital conduct.¹⁰¹ Many had long known of Edward's attachment to Mrs Simpson and, as Baldwin indicated to an

⁹⁷ *Baldwin Papers*, pp. 445–6 (1 Dec. 1937).

⁹⁸ J. G. Lockhart, *Cosmo Gordon Lang* (London, 1949), p. 395; J. S. Peart-Binns, *Blunt* (Queensberry, 1969), pp. 152–4, and see Donaldson, *EVIII*, p. 188.

⁹⁹ Bagehot, *English Constitution*, p. 50; J. Johnston, *The Lord Chamberlain's Blue Pencil* (London, 1990), esp. pp. 84–6, 103–4; Nicolson, *KGV*, p. 429; S. Cretney, *Law, Law Reform and the Family* (Oxford, 1998), ch. 4 – though Joynson-Hicks, the puritanical home secretary, hardly needed royal prompting.

¹⁰⁰ D. Laird, *How the Queen Reigns* (London, 1959), p. 264; Rose, *KGV*, p. 366; Wallis and *Edward Letters 1931–1937*, ed. M. Bloch (London, 1986), pp. 24–5, 29, 30. The divorcé in the 1924 Labour Cabinet was Wedgwood, who in 1936 was one of the few parliamentary 'King's friends'.

¹⁰¹ Remarkably, no one seems to have commented that the prime minister's eldest daughter had obtained a divorce in 1934.

unshocked Archbishop Lang, ministers would have been content if she had remained an unpublicized mistress. He even intimated this, more cautiously, to the King himself. Edward's objection that this would be hypocritical¹⁰² showed an entire misunderstanding of prevailing public codes. For a sovereign to want a divorcée as his wife, let alone as queen, was scandalous – not simply in the modern sense of media prurience, but in the older meaning of deep moral disturbance. That Mrs Simpson was obtaining a second divorce that might well face legal challenge, publicly exposing the King to charges of adultery, only made matters worse.¹⁰³ All the churches taught that marriage was an indissoluble union, and such royal flouting of Christian principle seemed certain to weaken the respect and loyalty of Free Churchmen and Roman Catholics, in the Dominions as much as Britain. For the Church of England the difficulty was still greater: since the 1900s its strictures against re-marriage of divorced persons had been made more explicit,¹⁰⁴ and in these circumstances it could hardly allow even its own supreme governor a religious marriage. Nor would its archbishops feel able to admit the King to the sacrament of coronation – given its themes of Christian virtue, adherence to church principles and sacrifice for the sake of duty – with all the damage that might imply for church–state relations, the nation's spiritual life and, as many would suppose, the British Empire's place in the divine order.¹⁰⁵ The recitation of Edward's titles in the abdication legislation silently but eloquently omitted the statutory epithet, 'Defender of the Faith'.¹⁰⁶

Even so, although the government was sensitive to Archbishop Lang's anxieties and the anticipated wider religious criticism, it did not act on

¹⁰² Ziegler, *KEVIII*, pp. 248, 293; *The Duff Cooper Diaries*, ed. J. Norwich (London, 2005), p. 230; *Baldwin Papers*, pp. 394, 421.

¹⁰³ For the legal issues see S. M. Cretney, 'The King and the King's Proctor: the abdication crisis and the divorce laws 1936–1937', *Law Quarterly Review* 116 (2000), 583–620, and 'The divorce law and the 1936 abdication crisis: a supplemental note', *ibid.* 120 (2004), 163–71.

¹⁰⁴ See e.g. *The Lambeth Conference 1930* (London, 1930), p. 42 (resolution 11). If anything, the stricture was even stronger in *The Lambeth Conference 1948* (London, 1948), p. 49 (resolutions 92, 94).

¹⁰⁵ G. I. T. Machin, 'Marriage and the churches in the 1930s: royal abdication and divorce reform 1936–7', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 42 (1991), 68–81; and see the verdict in A. Hastings, *A History of English Christianity 1920–1985* (London, 1986), pp. 248–9. A further embarrassment was that the Archbishops had prepared a 'Recall to Religion' in association with the coronation, to exploit its message of 'service and self-dedication': Bishops meeting, 1–2 July 1936; Lockhart, *Lang*, pp. 398, 400. Even when no longer king, Edward's eventual marriage caused much ecclesiastical difficulty: Donaldson, *EVIII*, pp. 320–1.

¹⁰⁶ When the omission was noted in Parliament, Simon as home secretary replied in *HCD* 318, cc. 2226–7 (11 Dec. 1936) that it had occurred because the King had not used the term in his own 'Instrument of Abdication'; but that document had been drafted by ministers and officials.

church advice but on broader and more secular concerns. Preservation of family life remained one of the highest social goods, considered by every organization involved in social and political issues to be essential for moral health, social cohesion and social improvement. For the largest women's organizations and much of the Labour movement, maintaining the security of marriage was also the foundation for raising the status of women. Conversely, many assumed that, as Princess Elizabeth's speech-writers would declare in 1949, divorce and separation were 'responsible for some of the darkest evils of our society today'.¹⁰⁷ Divorce remained circumscribed by social disapproval and legal restriction, permitted only as an extreme and exceptional resort: even the advocates of the divorce law reform bill which was passing through Parliament during the discussions over Edward's proposed marriage justified it as a means to strengthen the institutions of marriage and the family. Such priorities explain why private sexual irregularity could indeed seem a lesser evil than public divorce, or a divorcée becoming queen. Not only was the royal family assumed to be a model family; a leading function of the monarchy was to set an example in upholding the sanctity of marriage – as in other matters, precisely because this now seemed under pressure. 'Since the War', Baldwin told King Edward, 'there has been a lowering of . . . public morals, but people expect even more of the Monarchy'. Later he would epitomize the point in a supposed saying of a 'Yorkshire yokel': 'You can marry a whore & I can marry a whore, but the King can't. Because the King is not a man but a job'.¹⁰⁸

V

The most ubiquitous public values were those clustered around the concept of 'service': duty, self-sacrifice, mutual assistance. Obviously this was the ethic of government itself and the public services, but it was still more fundamental not just for the churches but also for the charities and voluntary services which before the creation of the welfare state helped sustain medical and social care. For many organizations the spirit of 'service' provided much of the answer to actual or feared social and political problems, whether poverty, industrial conflict or revolutionary or reactionary movements. It was for Liberals integral to good citizenship, for Labour the essence of socialism, and for Conservatives an antidote to

¹⁰⁷ Pimlott, *The Queen*, pp. 160–1. For the general issues see S. Cretney, *Family Law in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 205–50. The Labour party was divided over the issue of divorce law reform.

¹⁰⁸ *Baldwin Papers*, pp. 393–4, 421; *Champion Redoubtable. The Diaries and Letters of Violet Bonham Carter 1914–45*, ed. M. Pottle (London, 1998), p. 280 (28 Sept. 1943).

socialism. Clearly its particular meanings and purpose varied, but everyone in public life extolled the general principle – and so were irresistibly drawn into extolling what had long been its most prominent and willing exponent, the monarchy. After the 1918 armistice George V's 'message to the people' declared that the 'sacrifices made, the sufferings endured, the memory of the heroes who have died that Britain may live, ought surely to ennoble our thoughts and attune our hearts to a higher sense of individual and national duty'.¹⁰⁹ The point was reinforced by the royal family's leadership of annual acts of remembrance and at the funeral of the Unknown Warrior, and their recurring tributes at his Tomb. 'Public spirit', 'unselfish service', an Empire 'united by bonds of willing service', were characteristic royal phrases; and honouring the sacrifices of troops and appealing for service to assist the unemployed were the basis of the Prince of Wales's reputation for sympathy towards the working population. Even more than with other public values, there was an implied compact: to be respected, to retain its privileges, perhaps even to survive, the royal family had to practise, or appear to practise, what it preached. The new democracy, and the belief that only special moral qualities could hold it together, gave new force to the old notion of the king as servant of his people; and because of his exemplary role, the sovereign was presented even by Labour leaders as bearing a huge, almost unbearable, burden of work and responsibility.¹¹⁰ George V's Jubilee was a liturgy to mutual service, and on his death Baldwin as prime minister declared that 'the doing of his duty . . . was the guiding principle of his life'. The King had 'rigorously trained [his will] to place the public interest first and last', his 'own ease and pleasure were never considered', and through his example 'men had led better lives in the accomplishment of their daily duties . . . at home and to their country'.¹¹¹

Given the force of royal image-making and the interests of the state, the churches, the bodies under royal patronage, and many other voluntary organisations, this was the example that his eldest son was expected to follow. As the poignantly entitled *Sermons for the Coronation of His Majesty King Edward VIII* stated, 'our king is our King by virtue of the service he renders', and 'true royalty reveals itself in self-denying sacrifice'. Edward's speech-writers ensured that he appeared to subscribe wholly to this image: just as his father 'was ever actuated by His profound sense of duty', so he was 'resolved to follow in the way he was set before

¹⁰⁹ *The King to His People*, pp. 95–6.

¹¹⁰ E.g. Attlee in *HCDeb* 308, c. 16 (23 Jan. 1936), and 495, c. 964 (11 Feb. 1952).

¹¹¹ Baldwin, *Service*, p. 18 (broadcast, 21 Jan. 1936); *HCDeb* 308, c. 13 (23 Jan. 1936), and see *Record of the Silver Jubilee*, *passim*, for many similar statements from other public figures.

me'.¹¹² It was not just his choice of a divorcée for his wife that offended conventional opinion; more disturbing still was his determination to place personal desire before public interest, a selfishness that struck at the heart of the most obvious and essential royal and public principles. Baldwin was astounded that he showed no moral or spiritual struggle, 'no idea of sacrifice for duty'.¹¹³ Once the affair became public, numerous newspapers drew the social parallels: 'sacrifice of personal feelings is one which men and women in all ranks of life are often called upon to make . . . in obedience to the call of duty'.¹¹⁴ The contrast between the King's behaviour and that of the millions who had served in the King's armed forces was all too plain. As Queen Mary tried again to explain to her still uncomprehending son eighteen months later: 'It seemed inconceivable to those who had made such sacrifices during the war that you, as their King, refused a lesser sacrifice'.¹¹⁵

The rest of the royal family also knew what was at stake: in a reversal of the monarchy's presumed relations with ministers, they turned to the prime minister in entreaty, apology, even shame, and then gratitude. George VI well understood that his main task was 'to make amends' to the nation and empire.¹¹⁶ The verbal rehabilitation of the monarchy testifies to what had become central to its public position. The King's coronation broadcast reiterated over and over the key message: 'The highest of distinctions is the service of others, and to the Ministry of Kingship I have in your hearing dedicated myself, with the Queen at my side, in words of deepest solemnity. We will, God helping us, faithfully discharge our trust'. Baldwin's coronation broadcast drummed home the wider moral: like the King and Queen, 'let us dedicate ourselves . . . to the service of our fellows, a service in widening circles, service to the home, service to our neighbourhood, to our county, our province, to our country, to the Empire, and to the world'.¹¹⁷ That George VI came to the throne unexpectedly, reluctantly and, disadvantaged by his stammer, not obviously

¹¹² Alington et. al., *Sermons*, pp. 37, 40, and *passim*; the King's message in *HCD* 308, c. 10 (23 Jan. 1936).

¹¹³ *Baldwin Papers*, pp. 421-2. For a courtier's observations on the King's fatal selfishness, see Hart-Davis, *King's Counsellor*, pp. 108-9, 415: 'fundamental ideas of duty, dignity and self-sacrifice had no meaning for him'.

¹¹⁴ *News of the World*, 6 Dec. 1936; *Morning Post*, 7 Dec. 1936; *Birmingham Post*, *News Chronicle* and *Scotsman*, 11 Dec. 1936; and see Donaldson, *EVIII*, p. 299, describing a cartoon of a workman throwing down his tools with the comment 'How can I do my work without the woman I love beside me?'.

¹¹⁵ J. Pope-Hennessy, *Queen Mary 1867-1953* (London, 1959), p. 575. Letters from the general public in Baldwin papers, volumes 143-50, contain numerous references to the war dead and other personal sacrifices.

¹¹⁶ *Baldwin Papers*, p. 416, and letters from other royal persons, *ibid.*, pp. 413n, 415n, and in Baldwin papers volumes 176-7.

¹¹⁷ *King George VI to his Peoples*, pp. 2-3; Baldwin, *Service*, p. 144.

suited to the position, had the effect of emphasizing this renewed commitment to duty and service, and in time won him sympathy and respect. The message and example were made still more relevant – and more useful for the purposes of the government and most other public bodies – by the mobilization for the Second World War, the effort required for post-war reconstruction and the introduction of sweeping welfare and economic reforms. According to the King's 1941 Christmas broadcast, it was 'in serving each other and in sacrificing for our common good that we are finding our true life'.¹¹⁸ The ethic became very strong in the next royal generation. In a broadcast to mark her twenty-first birthday, Princess Elizabeth proclaimed 'a solemn act of dedication' which would resonate through her 1953 coronation and in the buoyant notions of a 'new Elizabethan age':

I declare before you all that my whole life . . . shall be dedicated to your service and the service of our great Imperial family . . . But I shall not have the strength to carry out this resolution alone unless you join in with me, as I now invite you to do. God help me to make good my vow and God bless all of you who are willing to share in it.¹¹⁹

VI

The monarchy retained its considerable prominence in the more democratic conditions of the early twentieth century because it became more purely the symbol and exponent of a particular set of public values, values promoted by almost all public organizations and respected by most of the general public. The abdication occurred because Edward VIII was, ultimately, indifferent or dismissive towards those values. No supposedly hidden political motives are required to help explain his departure: the public reason, his proposed marriage, was sufficient. The sensitivity of divorce for the monarchy was shown again in 1955 when, without any question of political complications, Princess Margaret was prevailed upon to renounce marriage to a divorced man, 'mindful of the Church's teaching that Christian marriage is indissoluble, and conscious of my duty to the Commonwealth'.¹²⁰ Edward VIII's marriage proposal mattered so much because it bore upon wider aspects of public morality – and also because it raised a still more straightforward principle. For rhetorical purposes, political leaders commonly claim to speak for the whole

¹¹⁸ *King George VI to his Peoples*, p. 29.

¹¹⁹ Pimlott, *The Queen*, pp. 115-18. The broadcast was written by Lascelles, who from the 1920s had been one of the Palace officials most critical of Edward's conduct, even resigning from royal service for a period: see Hart-Davis, *King's Counsellor*, pp. 104-10.

¹²⁰ Pimlott, *The Queen*, pp. 201-2, 218-20, 232-9; Hart-Davis, *King's Counsellor*, pp. 398-400.

'people' or nation, and Baldwin did so in his discussions with the King and in his House of Commons speech after the abdication. But what he and the Cabinet and officials really anticipated was public and newspaper division over the King's marriage proposal.¹²¹ In royal image-making the individual and the institution could not easily be separated; many might feel attached to Edward the person, rather than to the monarch as personified virtue. Yet the monarchy's greatest function was to symbolize national and imperial unity, and it was unacceptable that any individual monarch should be a cause of division on matters of public importance. In this sense the actual balance of public opinion was immaterial – though there is little doubt that Baldwin and the Cabinet did express the majority view and certainly that of most organizations, including the Labour movement.¹²²

Understanding the monarchy's popularity is notoriously difficult. Different individuals admired it for different reasons, and in various degrees of intensity. These reasons were not necessarily consistent. Some felt reverence towards a sanctified institution. Some were impressed by the pageantry, some by the illusion of proximity created by royal visits and radio broadcasts. Some admired royal philanthropy, and some idolized the romance of royal persons. Many respected the institution while responding to different aspects of what it represented. In November 1936 industrial South Wales cheered the King for his sympathy towards the unemployed, but in December religious South Wales – largely the same people – was appalled by his proposed marriage.¹²³ What can be said with some certainty is that various pressures and anxieties gave almost every other institution and association causes to approve and promote idealized notions of the monarchy and the royal family, and that the kings, their advisers and their speech-writers developed styles of presentation and statement which preserved high levels of public respect. The public was deluged with reasons to admire the monarchy, and during the Silver Jubilee and the coronations and royal funerals, the radio, newsreels and print media made it almost physically impossible to escape these messages. Even if these were not the only cause of royal popularity, they

¹²¹ As was also explicit in the discussions and the speech: *Baldwin Papers*, pp. 393–4, 396, 401–2; *HCD* 318, c. 2180–1 (10 Dec. 1936)..

¹²² Williams, *The People's King*, reveals that the King received large numbers of letters of support, and argues that the abdication was contrary to the wishes of 'ordinary people'. But Baldwin, Queen Mary and other public figures also received very many letters of concern or support from individuals of all classes. What is certain (and what was crucial) is that 'public opinion' was divided. See also the observations in Ziegler, *Crown and People*, pp. 35–9.

¹²³ *New Statesman*, 12 Dec. 1936; H. Dalton, *The Fateful Years. Memoirs 1931–45* (London, 1957), p. 114. The area had exceptionally high levels of chapel affiliation.

supplied a vocabulary for individuals to help express whatever other feelings of admiration or tolerance they felt towards it. These themes are aptly indicated by the comments of a road-sweeper and old soldier recorded by the novelist Philip Gibbs during the 1935 Jubilee:

The Royal Family . . . is a very respectable lot . . . Human, if you know what I mean. They feel kindly towards us, and we feel kindly towards them . . . [The King's] all right! A nice fellow – not like that there Hitler in Germany who puts folks into concentration camps because they don't see eye to eye with him. [He] does his duty like the rest of us, like I do mine, and I don't envy him his job. That's why I'm loyal. That's why we're all loyal.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ P. Gibbs, *England Speaks* (London, 1935), p. 1